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ONE MEANS

OF

PREVENTING PAUPERISM.

BY

MRS. C. R. LOWELL,
OF NEW YORK.

READ AT THE CONFERENCE OF CHARITIES,
HELD IN CHICAGO JUNE 12, 1879.

BOSTON:
FRANKLIN PRESS: RAND, AVERY, & COMPANY.
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ONE MEANS OF PREVENTING PAUPERISM.

BY MRS. C. R. LOWELL OF NEW YORK.

[Read at the Chicago Conference of Charities, June 12, 1879.]

THE legislature of New York, by concurrent resolution of May 27–29, 1873, directed the State Board of Charities to examine into the causes of the increase of crime, pauperism and insanity in that State. In compliance with this resolution, an examination, which occupied the Secretary of the Board, with the assistance of various commissioners, for the greater part of two years, was made into the antecedents of every inmate of the poorhouses of the State; and the result submitted to the legislature in the Tenth Annual Report of the State Board of Charities. Even a casual perusal of that report will convince the reader that one of the most important and most dangerous causes of the increase of crime, pauperism and insanity, is the unrestrained liberty allowed to vagrant and degraded women. The following are the records of a few only of the women found in the various poorhouses, — women who from early girlhood have been tossed from poorhouse to jail, and from jail to poorhouse, until the last trace of womanhood in them has been destroyed: —

"In the Albany County poorhouse, a single woman, forty years old, of foreign birth, and nine years in the United States, the mother of seven illegitimate children; the woman degraded and debased, and soon again to become a mother."

"In the Chautauqua County poorhouse, a woman, fifty-five years old, admitted when twenty-two as a vagrant; said to have been married, but the whereabouts of her husband is unknown; has been discharged from the house, and returned repeatedly, for the past thirty-three years, during which time she has had six illegitimate children."

"In the Cortland County poorhouse, an unmarried woman, twenty-seven years old, with her infant child; has been the mother

of four illegitimate children, and four of her sisters have also had illegitimate children. The woman fairly intelligent and educated but thoroughly debased and vagrant."

"In the Essex County poorhouse, a black woman, widowed, aged forty-nine years, and her daughter, single, aged twenty-four years, and her grandson, a mulatto, four years old, illegitimate, and born in the house. The first has been the mother of ten children, seven illegitimate; the second has had three illegitimate children. Both women are intemperate and thoroughly depraved and quite certain to remain public burdens, each having already been nineteen years in the house. A widowed woman, twenty-four years old, and two children aged respectively four and five years, both illegitimate and feeble-minded and born in the poorhouse, the latter being a mulatto. The woman was sent to the house when six years old, was afterwards placed out but soon returned, and has spent most of her time in this and other poorhouses; has also had three brothers and one sister who were paupers, and is soon again to become a mother; is thoroughly debased, and will probably remain, with her children, a burden through life."

"In the Green County poorhouse, a vagrant unmarried woman, forty years old, and first an inmate when twenty-one years of age; goes out from time to time, but soon returns, and will doubtless continue a public burden through life; has five illegitimate children. An unmarried girl, eighteen years of age, having two illegitimate children, the youngest of whom, an infant, was born in the house; was early orphaned and entered the poorhouse when only seven years of age; her mother a pauper, and she has had one brother and two sisters also paupers; is thoroughly debased, and offers but little hope of reformation."

"In the Genesee County poorhouse, a single woman, aged twenty-six years, admitted when eighteen years old; has three illegitimate children with her, aged respectively seven years, three years, and eight months, all of whom were born in the house; and also another child, bound out; was orphaned in early life, and, being neglected, soon became vagrant and idle and will probably continue to be a public burden."

"In the Herkimer County poorhouse, a single woman aged sixty-four years, twenty of which have been spent in the poorhouse; has had six illegitimate children, four of whom have been paupers."

"In the Montgomery County poorhouse, a woman twenty years old, illegitimate, uneducated, and vagrant; has two children in the house, aged respectively three years and six months, both illegitimate, and the latter born in the institution; recently married an intemperate crippled man, formerly a pauper, and the county will doubtless be further burdened with additional progeny."

"In the Oswego County poorhouse, an unmarried woman, twenty-nine years of age, born in the poorhouse of a neighboring county; has had five illegitimate children, one of whom only is living; the father, mother, and five sisters have been paupers; is ignorant, shiftless, and vagrant, and gives no hope of reformation."

"In the Otsego County poorhouse, a widowed woman aged thirty-five years, three times married (first when only thirteen), a vagrant, and has spent twelve years in poorhouses; has seven living children, three of whom have been paupers, and she seems likely to burden the public with additional progeny."

"In the Ontario County poorhouse, a married woman twenty-six years of age, frequently in jail for intoxication, two years an inmate, with a male child three years old and an infant girl aged two months; led a vagrant life in childhood, the father, mother, and four sisters being paupers; is debased and thoroughly degraded by sensual and immoral practices and gives but little hope of reformation; the husband said to be able, but declines to provide for her support. A girl eighteen years of age, unmarried, and only three months in the house; is well connected, prepossessing in appearance, but shameless in conduct; was early orphaned and has led a roving, vagrant life; is soon to become a mother and offers no hope of reformation."

"In the Orange County poorhouse, a woman, widowed, eighty years old, educated and temperate; admitted twenty years ago, with her husband, since deceased, and three female children, two of whom are dead; her daughter forty-four years old, ignorant and depraved, married at nineteen, now widowed; the latter had three children by her husband, one only being living, and subsequently four illegitimate children, all of whom are dead; two of her granddaughters, one twenty-four and the other thirteen years of age, the former single, uneducated, ignorant, and debased, and the latter an idiot; and her great-grand-daughter, three years old, illegitimate, also an idiot, and blind."

"In the Oyster Bay and North Hempstead town poorhouse, a

man seventy-two years of age, and his second wife, forty-nine years old, the former an inmate sixteen, and the latter twenty-eight years; the woman has borne four illegitimate children, one of whom, an idiot girl fifteen years old, is now in this house; the man and woman both ignorant, shiftless, and depraved, and classed as permanent burdens."

"In the Rockland County poorhouse, an unmarried woman, aged forty-two years, eleven years an inmate; has had four illegitimate children, two of whom are dead, and two provided for in families; is educated, but intemperate and vagrant and gives no promise of reformation. A single woman, nineteen years of age, first admitted to the poorhouse when twelve years old, and for some time past has led a vagrant, tramping life; is ignorant, shiftless, and degraded, and looked upon as incorrigible."

"In the Rensselaer County poorhouse, a married woman thirty-one years of age, separated from her husband nearly twelve years, since which time she has borne three illegitimate children, one of whom is dead, and two are now with her, the youngest being four months old; is ignorant, vagrant and depraved, and gives little promise of future self-support."

"In the St. Lawrence County poorhouse, a single woman, twenty-six years old, an inmate only a few months; has two illegitimate children with her, the younger born in the house, and has also another illegitimate child, provided for by friends; is educated and temperate, but confirmed in habits of vagrancy, and likely hereafter to burden the public."

"In the Suffolk County poorhouse, an ignorant, intemperate, unmarried woman aged sixty-one years, eighteen of which have been passed in poorhouses, giving birth during the time to three children, — one being a pauper, and two self-supporting."

"In the Westchester County poorhouse, an ignorant, vagrant, unmarried colored woman, thirty-two years of age, an inmate six years, having two illegitimate children provided for in families, and two (twins) one year old, with her, born in the institution."

These women and their children, and hundreds more like them, costing the hard-working inhabitants of the State annually thousands of dollars for their maintenance, corrupting those who are thrown into companionship with them, and sowing disease and death among the people, are the direct outcome of our system. The community itself is responsible for the existence of such miserable, wrecked specimens of humanity. These mothers are

women who began life as their own children have begun it, — inheriting strong passions and weak wills, born and bred in a poorhouse, taught to be wicked before they could speak plain, all the strong evil in their nature strengthened by their surroundings and the weak good crushed and trampled out of life. Hunted and hounded, perhaps committed to jail while their tender youth had yet some germs of virtue remaining, dragged through the mire, exposed to the wickedness of wicked men and women whose pleasure it is to sully and drag down whatever is more innocent than themselves,[1] in the power of brutal officials,[2] — what hope could there be for them? and how shall we cast a stone at them, whom we ourselves have, by the strong arm of the law, thrust into the direst temptation?

To begin at the beginning, what right had we to permit them to be born of parents who were depraved in body and mind? What right have we to-day to allow men and women who are diseased and vicious to reproduce their kind, and bring into the world beings whose existence must be one long misery to themselves and others? We do not hesitate to cut off, where it is possible, the entail of insanity by incarcerating for life the incurably insane: why should we not also prevent the transmission of moral insanity, as fatal as that of the mind?

Again, what right had we to leave these unhappy children to be reared in poorhouses, shut off from all that was good and pure, surrounded by all that was low and evil? The State of New York has at last awakened to the direful result of that negligence,[3] but none too soon, as the above records show; and even now, incredible as it may appear, there are men in the State (men, too, who

[1] As in the case of a young German girl in one of the New York County jails, whose only companion, an old woman, volunteered to teach her English, and made her repeat the vilest of words for the amusement of the male prisoners, who listened at the door which divided their prison from that of the women.

[2] Extract from a letter from Dr. Elisha Harris, Corresponding Secretary of the New York Prison Association: "In one county I saw three girls, who had been tramping all summer as leaders of a band of tramping boys. . . . When they wept, as though penitent, and asked who cared for them, the sheriff and his assistants seemed to regard them as objects of derision and sport. . . . In another jail, I found that a sheriff . . . had wantonly assaulted and degraded numerous young women prisoners; and, when sheriff in 1871 and 1872, had utterly brutalized three young girls."

[3] Chapter 173, Laws of 1875, State of New York, provides that "it shall not be lawful for any justice of the peace, police-justice, or other magistrate, to commit any child over three [amended in 1878 to read 'over two'] or under sixteen years of age, as vagrant, truant, or disorderly, to any poorhouse of this State; or for any county superintendent of the poor, or overseer of the poor, or other officer, to send any such child as a pauper to any such poor house." And, further, that "it shall be the duty of the county superintendents of the poor . . . to cause the removal of all children between the ages of three and sixteen years . . . from their respective poorhouses."

have personal knowledge of the very facts which to us appear so appalling) who are ready to condemn helpless children to a life-long pauperism by repealing the law of 1875, and to rear them in poorhouses, simply because it costs "the county" a few cents more a day to give them such a home as will save them from that misery. The calculation that forty or fifty years of dependence, even if the cost each year be reduced to seventy-five or eighty dollars, is more expensive to "the county" than four or five years at one hundred dollars a year, seems never to be made. The question of what duty the community owes to each of its members is certainly never considered.

Leaving, however, all consideration of duty, and looking only at the *right* of society, the community, which has to bear all the burden of the support of these maimed and crippled bodies and souls, has certainly a right to protect itself, so far as may be, against the indefinite increase of the weight of this burden. In self-defence, the working part of mankind may say to those whom they support by their work, "You yourselves we are prepared to save from starvation by the hard toil of our hands and brains, but you shall not add a single person besides yourselves to the weight we have to carry. You shall not entail upon us and our children the further duty of keeping your children alive in idleness and sin."

These men and women are now constantly maintained by the public, sometimes for years at a time in the same institution, sometimes continually changing from one to another, but never failing to demand a support from their fellows. Why, then, should they not be maintained in institutions fitted to save them from their own weaknesses and vices, where in due time they may be formed anew in body and mind, and be ready to enter the ranks of free and intelligent men and women? Why should they not spend years, if necessary, in institutions described by Gov. Haines of New Jersey in the following words: "Preventive and reformatory institutions are not to be regarded as places of punishment, but as schools of correctional education. . . . In them the ignorant are taught, the vicious restrained, the desponding cheered, the hopeful encouraged. In them industry becomes habitual, and good citizens are made of those who would otherwise become pests of society, following their own evil propensities, or becoming the victims of more practised and designing offenders." Surely no argument based on the right of men to liberty can have weight against such a proposal; nor, again, can any argument of "economy" be for a moment listened

to. It is not "economy" to allow an evil to grow and grow to terrifying dimensions, whatever may be the cost of crushing it out at the present time.

The words of Dr. Elisha Harris, Corresponding Secretary of the New York Prison Association, speaking of a prison for women (in the Thirty-second Annual Report of the Association), are most applicable: "Until the State shall have provided a prison and a reformatory refuge for criminal females, and until every county and city has more suitable places of detention for women than the present common jail, most of those who suffer arrest and conviction for crimes will become destroyers and injurers for their lifetime. It must be remembered that hope cannot be extinguished in any mind without hazard to society itself, and that, if smothered and blotted out in a female offender, her life thenceforward will cost the people vastly more when she is free from prison than when in, however great the expenses of the prison for women."

In the present paper, I speak chiefly of women, because they form the visible links in the direful chain of hereditary pauperism and disease, but it must not be forgotten that the treatment here prescribed for them should also be applied to the reformation of the men, whose evil propensities are likewise handed down from one generation to another.

During the year 1878, in thirty-four counties of the State of New York (having an aggregate population of 1,752,138), 304 women between the ages of fifteen and thirty years were sentenced to the county-jails, 95 of whom were under twenty-one years of age. Of the 304, 93 were committed as "prostitutes," "vagrants," or "disorderly;" 127 as "intoxicated," or "drunk and disorderly;" and the rest for other minor offences, as assault and battery, petty larceny, &c. During the same period, 197 women between the ages of fifteen and thirty were sentenced to the Albany and Onondaga County penitentiaries from thirty counties (fourteen of which were included in those from which the jail statistics have been taken, the remaining sixteen having an aggregate population of 1,001,939); of these prisoners 66 were under twenty-one years of age, and 98 were entered as "prostitutes," "vagrants," &c., while 100 were marked "intemperate." The offences of the rest were petty larceny, assault, &c. In twenty-seven poorhouses of counties with an aggregate population of 1,770,663, from Jan. 1, 1878, to Jan. 1, 1879, among the women between the ages of fifteen and thirty who were admitted, there

were 161 (of whom 68 were under twenty-one years) who were either prostitutes or intemperate, or *enceinte* with illegitimate children, and several could be counted under all of these classes. Thus we have during only one year, and in only a part of the State, 662 women between the ages of fifteen and thirty, guilty of what are called "minor offences," and dependent for longer or shorter periods on the public for maintenance, 254 of whom are prostitutes, and 276 drunkards. More than a third of these women are under twenty-one years of age, so that probably, for them at least, many years of a shameful life are in store, during which time the public will maintain them.

Among the women who have entered these poorhouses during the year, 73 were *enceinte* with illegitimate children, and many of these women had already one, two, or three illegitimate children, either with them or placed in asylums. The name of each woman of the 662 has been obtained from the official records in the poorhouses, jails and penitentiaries, with the facts about each; but the record in regard to the number of illegitimate children is very imperfect, as is shown by comparing these official statistics with facts collected by private individuals in regard to some of these same women. The counties of New York and Kings have been entirely omitted from the inquiry which has resulted in obtaining the above statistics, and reports have been obtained from only half of the poorhouses of the State, from two penitentiaries, and from only thirty-four of the sixty county-jails; so that the above figures do not give the whole number of young women who have been sentenced and become dependent in the State of New York, through their own sin, during the year 1878.

In his essay on "The Jukes," Mr. Dugdale has computed that in seventy-five years the descendants of five vicious pauper sisters amounted to twelve hundred persons, and had cost the State of New York more than one million and a quarter dollars. The expense to which the thousand young women who last year entered the poorhouses and jails of the State, many of them already habitual offenders, prostitutes and confirmed drunkards, will subject the State during the next fifty years, becomes a serious question, and one which it is worth while to consider.

The presence of these women in the poorhouses, penitentiaries and jails, under the circumstances, renders it certain that they have less than the average self-control. They have entered on the downward course. In neither jail, poorhouse, nor penitentiary,

will they find any thing to help them turn back. On the contrary, all the surroundings will force them lower and lower; and this would be the case, were they much more able to resist than they are. In the jail and penitentiary every door to virtue is closed, and every avenue to vice and crime is open. In the poorhouse they find others like themselves; and although the degrading influences may not be so strong as in jails and penitentiaries, they are there, and strong enough to prevent any chance of rescue. Having an inherited and deep-seated repugnance to labor, these women, both in the poorhouse and jail, are supported in absolute idleness, without even the bodily exercise which is necessary for health. They are shut up in poisonous air, suffering a physical degeneration only to be compared with the ruin wrought at the same time in their minds and souls.

To rescue these unfortunate beings and to save the industrious part of the community from the burden of their support, "Reformatories" should be established, to which all women under thirty, when arrested for misdemeanors, or upon the birth of a second illegitimate child, should be committed for very long periods (not as a punishment, but for the same reason that the insane are sent to an asylum), and where they should be subject to such a physical, moral and intellectual training as would re-create them. Such training would be no child's play, since the very character of the women must be changed, and every good and healthy influence would be rendered useless without the one element of *time*. It is education in every sense which they need, and education is a long process, tedious and wearing, requiring unfaltering hope and unfailing patience on the part of teacher and pupil. Consequently these Reformatories must not be prisons, which would crush out the life from those unfortunate enough to be cast into them; they must be *homes*, — homes where a tender care shall surround the weak and fallen creatures who are placed under their shelter, where a homelike feeling may be engendered, and where, if necessary, they may spend years. The unhappy beings we are speaking of need, first of all, to be taught to be women; they must be induced to love that which is good and pure, and to wish to resemble it; they must learn all household duties; they must learn to enjoy work; they must have a future to look forward to; and they must be *cured*, both body and soul, before they can be safely trusted to face the world again.

To do all this, their surroundings must be favorable. And what should those surroundings be?

Without pretending that great improvements might not be suggested, the following description will give some idea of an institution where the necessary circumstances might be obtained: —

1st, A comparatively large tract of land (from two hundred and fifty to five hundred acres), to allow of free out-of-door life without any communication with the outer world.

2d, A series of buildings, each to accommodate from fifteen to twenty-five women, and so arranged as to afford ample means of classification.

3d, These buildings to be under the charge of women officers.[1]

4th, The inmates to be trained in as many kinds of labor as possible, — all household work, sewing, knitting, cooking, washing and ironing, inside the house; and outside, to work in gardens and greenhouses, to take care of cows, to be dairy-maids, &c.: the object being their improvement in every respect, and also their being finally fitted to support themselves by honest industry.[2]

5th, Besides this education in labor, their mental and moral faculties should be enlarged by constant teaching, — a school being one of the main features of the Reformatory.

6th, The endeavor should also be made to restore the physical health of the women and they should be kept under the care of a physician of their own sex.

7th, The diversity of buildings would afford means of grading the inmates, and a transfer from one to another would mark a step in advance, or a temporary fall to a lower grade. By this means, the constant "looking forward" necessary to a hopeful life would be obtained.

8th, The board of managers (which should be composed of both men and women) should have power to place out the women committed to their charge, in situations where their wages should belong to themselves, but where they would still be under guardianship and liable to recommitment to the Reformatory in case of ill conduct.

[1] The success of the Indiana Reformatory Prison, and even the short experience of the Massachusetts Prison at Sherborn, — both under the exclusive charge of women, — prove how great an influence for good female officers may exercise in prisons for women. Of the prisoners discharged from the Indiana Prison, eighty per cent are known to be doing well, and there has been but one recommitment in five years.

[2] Incidentally, the labor of the inmates would partially support them, and thus even the immediate charge on the public for their maintenance would be diminished. At present the expense to each county for the support of the inmates of its jail and poorhouse is a tax on the industrious part of the people. No work is done in the jails of New York (with two exceptions); and in the poorhouses the only work exacted is taking care of the farms in a more or less inefficient way by the men, and a little sewing by the women.

Under such a system, many of the women, who with our present jail and poorhouse education are doomed, might without doubt be rescued. They need to be saved from temptation (which assails them from within and without), and to be guided aright, and many of them will respond joyfully to the efforts for their improvement.

If, however, there were no hope of reforming even one of the thousand young women now beginning what may be a long life of degradation and woe, if the State owed no debt to those whom it has systematically crushed and imbruted from their earliest years, even then it would be the *wisest economy* to build houses for them, where they might be shut up from the present day till the day of their death. They will all live on the public in one way or another for the rest of their lives, many of them will continue to have children, and to cut off this baneful entail of degenerate propensities would be an economy, even though the term of guardianship ended only with the unhappy life itself. For *self-protection*, the State should care for these human beings who, having been born, must be supported to the end; but every motive of humanity, justice, and self-interest should lead to the extinction of the line so soon as possible.

Even the weak State of Hawaii, in order to save its people from the contagion of a physical leprosy, has established an asylum for all who are tainted, on a separate island, to which all lepers of whatever rank are banished for life. Shall the State of New York suffer a moral leprosy to spread and taint her future generations, because she lacks the courage to set apart those who have inherited the deadly poison and who will hand it down to their children, even to the third and fourth generations?

Dr. Elisha Harris, in his introduction to the fearful history of "The Jukes," makes the following striking assertions: —

"A departure downward from virtue to vice and crime is possible in the career of any youth, but the number of well-born and well-trained children who thus fall is exceedingly small. Habitual criminals spring almost exclusively from degenerating stocks; their youth is spent amid the degrading surroundings of physical and social defilement, with only a flickering of the redeeming influence of virtuous aspiration. The career of offenders so trained at last becomes a reckless warfare against society, and when the officers of justice overtake them and consign them to prisons, the habits of vicious thought and criminal action have acquired the strength and quality of instincts."

Knowing this, shall we stand by, and let this outrage against humanity go on? Shall we make our jails and poorhouses the breeding-places of paupers and criminals? Shall we permit the young to be driven into vice? Shall we expose them to the sight and temptation of vices, of which we cannot even listen to the description? Or shall we, so far as we can, assure to each child born in the State of New York a *chance* at least to be virtuous and happy? Shall we continue the wise policy already entered on, and remove all children born in our public institutions from low influences during childhood, and try to root up the evil propensities which they have received from their parents?

Shall we finally, when, overcome by temptation, they have taken one false step, — shall we tenderly turn them aside, and guide them with strong, kind hands, back to the path of virtue and to the knowledge and love of God?

These questions must be answered by the people of the State of New York, and by their representatives and law-makers.

JOSEPHINE SHAW LOWELL.

New York, May 28, 1879.

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